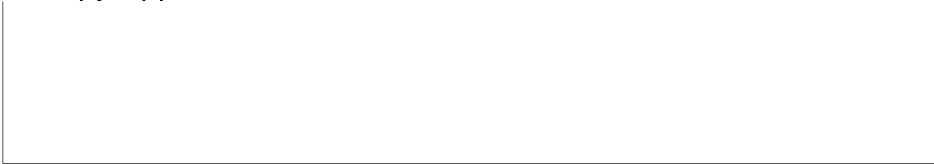


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Central Intelligence Agency  
Office of Current Intelligence  
15 January 1965

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Communist Buildup in Laos

Summary

Although the military situation in Laos has been quiet for several months, there has recently been a significant reinforcement of North Vietnamese forces in the Plaine des Jarres and the Panhandle. (See map) These movements have placed the Communists in a position to meet any limited escalation of hostilities by the US with a variety of retaliatory moves, ranging from driving Kong Le out of his position at Muong Soui through seizure of one or more points on the Mekong to a major offensive against the northern provinces of South Vietnam.



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1. The Communist military posture in the Southeast Asian border areas has been significantly stiffened since last summer, when it became evident that the US was willing to engage in at least limited escalation in its operations in Laos and North Vietnam. In South China and North Vietnam, this heightened readiness has principally been reflected by a substantial increase in air defenses, including the transfer of 53 jet fighters to North Vietnam.

2. In Laos, the Communist buildup has involved a substantial input of additional troops from North Vietnam. This reinforcement, although it provides improved defenses for key installations and infiltration routes, also gives the Communists a capability to move sharply, and with little or no warning, against targets in Laos and South Vietnam should they decide on retaliation for increased pressures brought to bear on them by the US.

3. Although the Communists have stepped up their roadbuilding and counter-guerrilla activity in northern Laos, the principal troop buildups have been in the Plaine des Jarres area and in the Panhandle region of south-central Laos. Since the reopening of Route 7 to major convoy traffic in late September, an average of 15-20 trucks a day has moved from North Vietnam to the Plaine carrying both troops and supplies. Roadwatch teams near Route 7 have not reported for over three weeks, suggesting they have been forced to take cover by increased enemy activity. We believe ten North Vietnamese battalions--probably including newly arrived elements of the North Vietnamese 335th Brigade normally stationed at Moc Chan--are now positioned on the Plaine des Jarres and to the east along Route 7.

4. These forces, which up to now have been engaged in only limited operations, could be used to spearhead a drive against Kong Le's major position at Muong Soui and westward along Route 7 to restore Communist control over its junction with Route 13, which was retaken by rightist forces last summer. From this key road junction, they

would be able to threaten Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The units in the Plaine are also in position to drive south on Route 4 past Tha Thom toward Paksane in the Mekong River Valley.

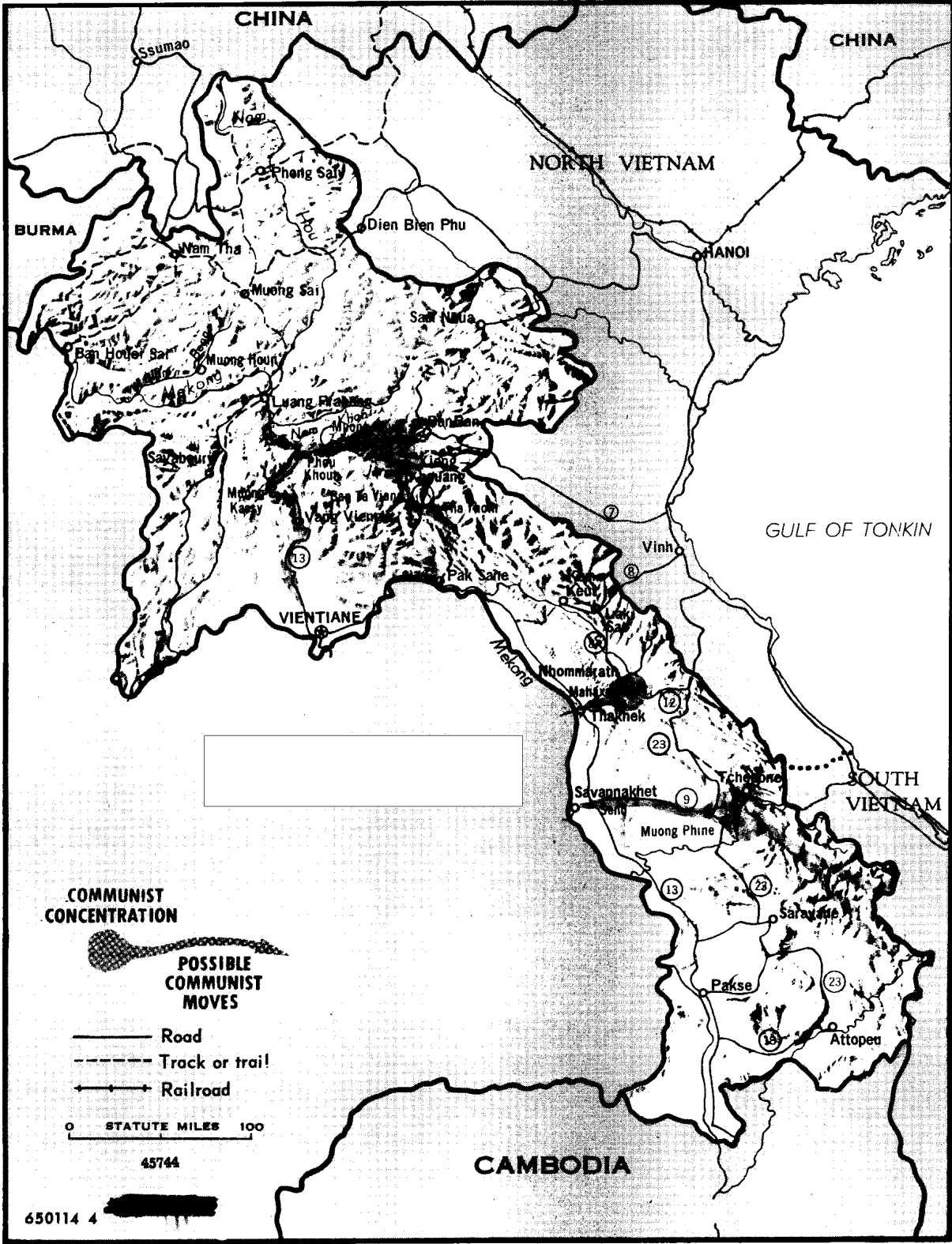
5. Farther south, the buildup has dated from the middle of December, with reinforcements moving from North Vietnam along Route 12 to the Nhommarath-Mahaxay region, and south on Route 23 to the Muong Phine-Tchepone area.

6. The Communists have moved an estimated 1000-1500 troops--reportedly North Vietnamese--to buttress their forces in the Nhommarath-Mahaxay area. Communist forces in the area, now comprising about five battalions, probably could succeed in occupying the lightly-defended town of Thakhek on the Mekong (a position easily taken by Communist forces during the Indochina War following a drive along Route 12).

7. A considerably larger number of Communist troops--probably 4-5,000--have deployed southward from the North Vietnamese border to the Muong Phine-Tchepone area. Traffic analysis indicates that these forces may include elements--perhaps even the headquarters--of the North Vietnamese 325th Division.

8. Positioned astride Route 9, these forces have the capability of moving either westward into the Mekong Valley to seize the government strong-points at Savannakhet and Seno (site of one of the two best airfields in Laos) or southeast along the border for a subsequent move into South Vietnam. The latter move would entail much greater logistic problems and would take considerably longer to develop. This threat might also be more difficult for the US to recognize immediately, but--especially if it were undertaken in conjunction with other Communist regimental size units thought to be stationed in this border region--could seriously jeopardize Saigon's already shaky control over the northern provinces.

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